

THE LADY AND THE LOTUS: REPRESENTATIONS OF WOMEN IN THE ACHAEMENID EMPIRE

BY

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Abstract: Representations of women in the Achaemenid empire have not been studied extensively yet. One particular kind of image, that of a woman in Achaemenid dress holding a lotus or other object, although recognized as part of an empire wide Achaemenid iconography, seems to elude interpretation. This article looks into the context and role of the image, and the role played by the lotus in gender definition.

Keywords: Achaemenid empire, women, gender, iconography

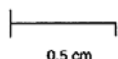
The study of women in the Achaemenid empire is still in its infancy, especially when it comes to matters of gender and representations of men and women on seals and other objects. The textual information on women connected to the court, on their social standing and the range of activities they were involved in has been studied extensively (e.g. Brosius 1996), but discussions of pictorial evidence do not form a substantial part of these studies. Seeing the amount of iconographical material we have, this seems rather strange, but there are reasons for this lack of interest.

First, the documentary evidence is quite abundant and thus makes for an easily accessible and fruitful field of study. Second, the existing literature on representations of women in the Achaemenid empire is very small. Essentially, there is no standard work on these representations or their meaning; every scholar involved works from his or her own suppositions.

In this paper I would like to focus on one particular type of representation specific to the Achaemenid period, that of a female holding a lotus flower. This image seems the most promising for a discussion of origins, distribution and meaning, since predecessors are known, and its distribution is remarkably wide.

The lady and the lotus

The image in question is that of a curvy female with a long braid falling over her back, wearing a wide sleeved dress with many folds, and sometimes a crown or a veil (Fig. 1, see for all images discussed Table A). She stands, or sits on a low stool, and can be accompanied by a male in



249

Fig. 1. From
Kaptan 2002: DS 83.

Persian dress or other females¹. This way of portraying a woman was developed during the Achaemenid period, although earlier images sharing some of its characteristics are known (see below). The image is usually seen as part of the 'graeco-persian' style tradition (Kaptan 2002: 54). Most of the images known at present are depicted on seals, pendants and rings (which of course also acted as seals). One image is engraved on the inside of the lid of a silver box from Erzingan in eastern Turkey (Dalton 1964: fig. 19), and four examples of this image are present in the Oxus treasure on two little gold sheets, presumably used to decorate clothing, and on two gold rings (idem: nr. 89, 93, 103, 104).

Unfortunately, only a few of the artefacts that carry this kind of image come from a secure archaeological context (see Table A). One was found in a tomb at Gorgippa (Black Sea coast) (Boardman 2001: nr. 878). In the archives from Daskyleion and Wadi Daliyeh we encounter the impressions of seals bearing the image of a woman holding a lotus (DS 83, 101; WD 6, 52; see Kaptan 2002, Leith 1990). The tapestry from Pazyryk tomb 5 was found along with many other artefacts belonging to the male and female buried there (Rudenko 1970: App. I). The date of the Pazyryk burials is still heavily debated, but they seem to cover the Achaemenid period and the centuries following it (see for the latest discussion Mallory et al. 2002). As at the time of writing the Persepolis Fortification seals on our subject have not been published yet, this huge source of information unfortunately cannot be used.

¹ I have only included one figure, since all the examples of the lady with lotus are very similar. Also, the main purpose of this paper is to discuss not the particulars of the separate examples but the properties of the motif as a whole.

Table A: Catalogue of images

IMAGE	MEDIUM	CONTEXT	DATE	REFERENCE
Female in nimbus holding lotus, standing on lion	Cylinder seal	Found in grave at Gorgippa	5 th century	Boardman 2001: Nr. 878
Female holding lotus, standing, male with bow beside her	Engraving on inside of lid of silver box	Allegedly from Erzingan, Turkey	5 th century	Dalton 1964: fig. 19
– Female, standing, accompanied by male touching her neck – Female, standing, holding something, male touching her neck	Stamp seal	Wadi Daliyeh Archive	375-334	Leith 1990: WD 6 and 52
– Female holding lotus, standing, male leaning on staff, dog; – Female, standing, holding lotus	Stamp seal	Daskyleion Archive	?	Kaptan 2002: DS 83 and 101
Four females standing on either side of censer, the two foremost holding flower	Tapestry	Pazyryk tomb nr. 5	?	Rudenko 1970: fig 138
Female, seated, holding lotus	Stamp seal	Allegedly from Mersin	?	Boardman 2001: nr. 990
Female holding lotus, standing (two examples)	Gold sheet	Oxus treasure	?	Dalton 1964: nr. 89 and 93
Female, seated, holding lotus (two examples)	Ring (seal)	Oxus treasure	?	Dalton 1964: nr. 103 and 104
Female, standing, holding lotus, male touching her neck; seated female holding lotus	Pendant (seal)	Allegedly from Cyprus	?	Boardman 2001: nr. 891
Female holding lotus, standing	Stamp seal	Allegedly from Eretria	?	Boardman 2001: nr. 879
Female holding lotus, standing; male leaning on staff	Pendant (seal)	?	?	Boardman 2001: fig. 289
Female holding lotus, standing; male leaning on staff; sitting male with bow	Pendant (seal)	?	?	Boardman 2001: fig. 294
Female, standing, holding lotus, male leaning on staff	Stamp seal	?	?	Boardman 2001: fig. 297
Female holding lotus, standing, male touching her neck	Stamp seal	?	?	Boardman 1975: nr. 87
Female, seated, holding lotus, other female standing opposite her	Cylinder seal	?	?	Briant 1996: fig. 30
Female holding lotus, standing, male leaning on staff	Pendant (seal)	?	?	Boardman 2001: nr. 867

At Jerablus (Nunn 2000; Tfl. 11.12, also Moorey 2002: fig. 4), Al Mina and Tell Mastuma (Moorey 2002: fig 3) some of the terracotta plaques found in rubbish pits show a woman in Persian dress holding a flower. They can hardly be described as graeco-persian images and differ from those described above in hairstyle and in the medium chosen. However, they are relevant to our discussion. First, they are clearly part of Achaemenid iconography since the female clad in Persian dress and holding a flower is a new addition of the Achaemenid period to the corpus of already existing clay plaques portraying (nude) females. Therefore, they are highly valuable when it comes to explaining the use of the lotus and its meaning in female representations, all of which we will discuss later.

There are also many representations, especially figurines, from Cyprus of females carrying flowers, probably representing worshippers or maybe the goddess worshipped (see for some early examples and an overview of Cypriot art in general Buchholz 2000). The problem with these figurines, however, is that they stem from a long tradition of females carrying flowers native to Cyprus, and show little Achaemenid influence. Also, because they were created in the context of Cypriot religion, they may have a meaning specific to that context. Apart from the fact that they show there was a tradition of flower carrying females on Cyprus before the development of the Achaemenid version, it is hard to identify the connection between them and our corpus of different, Achaemenid images.

Provenances and context

As most of the images occur on objects used as seals or as sealings, we are able to say something about the context they were used in, namely in the administrative processes of the empire. Also, the seals in our corpus functioned as pieces of jewellery, either as rings or pendants. Thus, they have a second context in which they are means of personal adornment. The use of the image on the inside of a lid stimulates ones imagination; it gives the image an air of secrecy, since the inside of the box was of course only accessible to a very small number of people. Seemingly by contrast, the image from Pazyryk was used on quite a sizeable item perfect for display.

Some of the images also have geographical provenances. When we look at the provenances, there does not seem to be one particular area of the Achaemenid empire in which they concentrate, however much the term 'graeco-persian' for this kind of imagery might suggest such a phenomenon.

The only region not represented is the Persian heartland, but that might be due to the skewed nature of the material (six of the seals have no provenance) and the lack of published material (see above). There is no information on the place of manufacture of most of the images and especially the seals apart from where they were found, though it has been suggested on the basis of Greek influences that western Anatolia was the main producer. Such an argument does not hold water, because Greek influences do not equal Greek provenance. Consequently, modern researchers are moving away from these qualifications, as they add nothing to the discussion.

It should be noted that the images show a high degree of standardization, so that a central place of manufacture could be suggested. However, without information on the place of origin of the raw materials used or other archaeological evidence to support such a notion, the image could equally well have been used for decoration throughout the empire.

The lotus

The part of the image that is of prime interest to us is the attribute the female carries, the lotus flower. The flower is depicted as a triangular shape, sometimes with three separate leaves, and is held in one hand, usually close to the face (Fig. 1).

Although this image of a woman has many components (the dress, the braid, the curves) that make it a novelty of the Achaemenid period, the lotus itself is a well known motif in representations of women in the Ancient Near East. It can be found as early as the period of the Middle Kingdom in Egypt and the Levant (e.g. Keel & Uehlinger 1998: fig. 65-72), and by the 6th century it had spread to Anatolia (e.g. Mellink 1998: W3), Cyprus (e.g. Buchholz 2000: fig. 8f, Yon 1974: nr. 37), Assyria (e.g. Barnett 1957: S8), Urartu (Akurgal 1961: fig. 16) and Carthage (Parrot 1975: fig. 156).

The Achaemenid period saw the development of a new image, but also the continuation of earlier imagery, as on Cyprus (e.g. Hermary 1981: fig. 26), Sardinia (Moscati 1990: 193), the Levantine coast (e.g. Nunn 2000: Tfl. 11.12, see also Moorey 2002) and in Egypt (e.g. Bothmer 1960: fig. 1). In these images (which also show a fair degree of standardization) the woman is depicted frontally, holding the lotus to her breast, without the dress and hairdo common in the new Achaemenid images. The context of these images is also very different from that of the seal images;

they are depicted mostly on stone (funerary) stelae, found in the necropolis of (Phoenician) cities, or on clay plaques.

Many different interpretations have been put forward to describe the meaning of the lotus. The *Reallexicon für Ägyptologie* (Vol III 1980, 'Lotos') gives an explanation of the Egyptian use of the lotus. It was seen as a symbol of rebirth and the circle of life. It was also believed to have fertilizing properties, as eating it brought fertility. In short, the lotus was closely connected to life and death, especially to the transitions between the two. It was never used as an indication of divine status, since both mortals and divinities appeared with it (Moorey 2002: 216).

Additionally, it has been interpreted as a sign of rulership or special status (Okran 2002: 473). As for the Levant, Beck describes the lotus and lotus friezes used at Kuntillet (8th century) as a framework for the representation of kingship (Beck 2000: 180). Keel & Uehlinger tone that down, and see the lotus a symbol of the official, instead of royal, character of a site (Keel & Uehlinger 1998: 245). They also connect the lotus to creative powers, and suggest that deities represented with lotuses could be creator gods (idem: 345).

In a recent article discussing the clay plaques from the Levantine coast mentioned above, Moorey notes that only the clothed females carry flowers. As the plaques were placed with the rubbish of the household, Moorey identifies the females as worshippers, but has little more to say about the lotus in their hands than that it was a symbol of regeneration (Moorey 2002: 216).

Yon does not attach any special significance to the lotus flowers so abundantly present in Cypriot art, but sees them as offerings to a goddess, made by women (Yon 1974: 109). In the case of Anatolia Donceel also interprets them as feminine attributes, but she further notes the royal connection and describes lotuses rather vaguely as representing 'les plaisirs de la vie' (Donceel-Voute 1984: 109). Interestingly, in her interpretation of a relief from Paphlagonia on which one male hands another male a lotus, the lotus gains a totally different significance; it symbolizes power and authority, and the gesture of handing it over indicates the transition of these two (idem). Finally, Dalton seems to interpret the lotus along the line of Greek male values; it characterises 'youthful bloom', and is '...not only a sign of divinity or royal power, but also an emblem of victorious strength which might be transferred from one person to the next...' (Dalton 1964: 27).

The problem with all of these interpretations is that they deal with images from different periods, different regions and very different iconographical traditions. Moreover, they are specific to one or a few images, and thus are hard to transfer to other images. Also, these interpretations are based on images involving men and women, and as such overlook the gender aspect of the image. It is not at all clear whether the lotus had the same significance in connection to men as it had in connection to women.

The problem of gender

The nature of the connection of the lotus to men and women leads us to the next issue; gender. Is the lotus a specifically female attribute in the Achaemenid period? The answer to that question is: no.

The king is depicted with a lotus at Persepolis (see Pritchard 1954: nr. 463), as is the man mentioned earlier on a relief from Paphlagonia (see Briant 1996: fig. 47), as are the figures on 4th century Samarian coinage (see Meshorer & Qedar 1991: nrs. 18, 21, 33, 36-8) and the man depicted on a stele from Saqqara (see Mathieson et al. 1995: fig. 3).

In the corpus of the newly developed Achaemenid period images described above, however, it is *always* the woman who holds the lotus when she is represented together with a man.

The only exception to this can be found on the tomb of the Harpies from Lycia, where both the man depicted on the west side, and the woman depicted on the east side hold a lotus (see Shahbazi 1975). However, these images do not occur on the same side of the tomb, i.e. they are not both visible at the same time, and the woman is not represented in the standard way (with braid and wide sleeves). Second, the image occurs in a very different context from those on seals. Lastly, the man is not shown in a way similar to males appearing alongside females carrying a lotus.

The male accompanying our female is also a new figure in Near Eastern art. He is represented standing or sitting, wearing a hat with side flaps, trousers and a tunic. He usually carries a bow, or leans on a spear or staff (Fig. 1). Apart from the staff, the male from Lycia has nothing in common with these males. As is the case with female representations, this way of portraying a man is only one of several current in the Achaemenid empire. The king is represented in a somewhat different manner, with long robes and a crown (see e.g. Pritchard 1954: nr 463 mentioned above), while on

other seals and reliefs men may be shown wearing the same outfit but riding a horse or a chariot (e.g. DS 71-77, see Kaptan 2002).

In male iconography, the lotus occurs in specific circumstances; the king seated in his audience hall holds a lotus, a crowned and robed figure on Samarian coins holds one, and the figure from Saqqara is sitting on a throne as well, as are some males from the Persepolis Fortification archive (PFS 22, 170, Garrison 2000: fig. 25, 26), as is our male from the Harpagid monument. The men from Paphlagonia are not enthroned, but are partaking in a banquet, as is the man from Saqqara. No ordinary males are 'standing around' holding a lotus like our females seem to be doing.

However, images do exist of women, seated or enthroned and holding a lotus, in the same kind of composition as men. The most famous example of this image is probably the seal from the De Clercq collection on which a seated, veiled female wearing the wide sleeved dress is presented with a bird by a smaller, pigtailed figure, while another female stands apart, wearing a crown and the typical dress (see Briant 1996: fig. 30). The seated female is holding a lotus. This image has a predecessor in a medalion and breastplate from Toprakkale (Urartu) dated to the 7th century on which a female is portrayed, wearing a veil, sitting on a throne, holding something that looks like a flower, and receiving another female (see Akurgal 1961; fig. 16).

A similar scene without the lotus is present on an unprovenanced seal dated to the 8th century, on which an enthroned woman is served by another woman. The inscription reads 'Ahatmilk wife of Yasha' (Avigad 1997: nr. 1102).

Thus, in one case, the context of the lotus is the same for male and female representations. It is therefore probable that the meaning of the lotus in this overlapping context is similar for both sexes. For the newly developed images, however, there is a clear separation between male and female attributes (and thus context), in which the lotus is associated with women, and the bow and spear with men.

The meaning of the lotus: audience and banquet scenes

What can we say about the meaning of the lotus when it occurs in this overlapping context? As we have seen, those images are closely concerned with the audience and the banquet scene, whether male or female. Both these scenes have a similar basis; one person is receiving other persons, whether

as guests for a meal or as visitors, messengers or supplicants. In both instances the balance of power would lie with the inviting party.

Also, both throwing a banquet and receiving people requires a certain amount of wealth and leisure, and a certain amount of social status. And whereas banqueting seems to be a primarily male activity (note the absence of *all*-female representations of this scene in Achaemenid times), holding audience is not necessarily a male one.

This fact is not reflected in most interpretations of female audience scenes. Whereas interpreting a scene with a man receiving subordinates as an audience scene is considered perfectly plausible, females involved in the same activity are often labelled goddesses (e.g. Boardman 2003: 17/1-42 v. 20/x2). This of course does not make sense. I do not exclude the possibility that some females are supposed to represent goddesses (and following that line of thought we should also include the possibility that some males represent gods), I simply do not think it is the only one.

The lotus in this context, thus, is connected to the social standing, the wealth, and the authority of the person holding it. In this sense the lotus is not related to gender, it is only related to the status of the person holding it. Whether that person was mortal or divine might not have been expressed by the lotus (as it did not in Egypt), but by other attributes like the nimbus around the female holding a lotus on the cylinder seal from Gorgippa (Boardman 2001: nr. 878), or the fact that she is standing on a lion (see for other goddesses standing on animals Keel and Uehlinger 1998: figs. 69 & 72, Pritchard 1954: nrs. 470-73, and for a discussion of this type of representation and its repercussions on other Achaemenid period representations see Kaptan 2002: 51-3).

The lotus engendered

Unfortunately, we cannot transpose this meaning to the new images of females and males described above. Here the lotus occurs in a different context. There is no audience, no banquet, there are no crowns. Instead, there is intimacy, although emblematic. Also, there is separation. Men are involved in male things, holding a spear, carrying a bow, cleaning their gear. Women carry cups, wraths, jugs, and lotus flowers. Both are confirmed in their gender roles; men fight and hunt, women nurture and care. Apparently, the lotus fitted in with this conception of femininity.

The clay plaques mentioned above offer support for this interpretation. Although the matter is still debated, the evidence available for the nude female plaques and amulets so widely spread in Mesopotamia and the Levant suggests a close relationship ‘with personality, good luck, prosperity, and (sexual) emotions, and as such [they are] linked to Inanna/Ishtar, whose domain is private life’ (Wiggermann 1998: 52-3, see also Moorey 2002: 204-5). As the plaques depicting clad females holding lotuses were included in this tradition, we may assume that they shared at least some of the meanings of nude female plaques.

Thus the lotus becomes a very gender specific item, not necessarily connected to status at all. The rest of the image shows that it was connected to Achaemenid values in one way or another, too. As we have seen, the clad females on clay plaques from the Levant are the only ones carrying flowers, the traditionally represented nude females do not. Also, the Persian dress of the man and woman, and the activities of the man all indicate the Achaemenid character of the scene (on male values see Briant 1996: Ch. 6).

Whether this should be seen as an indication of ethnicity, I do not know. Seeing the spread of the image, it would seem more likely that it was not ethnicity per se that people sought to display here. It would seem more probable to me that the message of the image was concerned with one’s station in life, that people were showing that they belonged to a certain class of people — people who lived their life in a way similar to that portrayed by the images, people who adhered to the values expressed there. Seen in this light, the lotus and the image it is used in again become an indicator of social position, as well as of gender roles.

Past interpretations of the lady and the lotus

There has been one publication in the past dealing with the meaning of scenes with females holding flowers or males and females together as shown on Fig. 1. Calmeyer (Calmeyer 1980) tried to find an explanation by referring to a story told by Chares of Miletus, the chamberlain of Alexander the Great (*apud* Athenaeus XIII.575). Apparently, the Persians were very fond of one particular story of a prince, Zariandres, and princess, Odatis, who fell in love. The girl’s father did not approve of the affair, however, and gathered many young men and asked Odatis to give a gold cup to the one she wanted to marry. Zariandres, who was of course not

invited, still managed to turn up, so Odatis gave him the cup and they married happily ever after. The images from this story supposedly decorated many public and private buildings throughout the Persian empire, and Odatis became a popular girl's name. Calmeyer (1980: 61) connects this story to a similar story told by Firdousi, in which the girl dreams of giving her lover a sweet smelling posy. He links this last story to the images of women holding a lotus described above, and interprets the cup in Chares as a western version of the tale.

Although it is of course possible that more versions of the same tale circulated in the empire, Chares explicitly mentions the cup and not the flower. In my view, the only way in which the images could be linked to the story would be through the standardization of the imagery, which then would always represent these particular people. But even here, I am not convinced. Most notably, most of the people represented do not look like a prince and princess, crowns, robes and thrones are not a standard feature. The scenes involved (cleaning a bow, leaning on a spear, bringing refreshments, playing with the dog, being close) evoke an image of 'country life', elements of which (like hunting, drinking, raising a family) we find displayed on other Achaemenid period artefacts, rather than the activities of a royal couple. Last, there are no other components of Chares' tale that link up with the images, there is no explicit mention made of the prince's activities as a bowman, or of the princess' care for her lover. Instead, the scenes seem to show married life on a less grand scale.

The same line of thought has been followed by Shahbazi in his article on the symbolism of flower giving in the Sasanian period. He mentions one relief on which a female hands a flower to a male, in this case the king (Tang-i Qandil; Shahbazi 1998: 60). He also uses a tale by Firdousi, in which a woman selects the hero Goshtap as her husband by giving him flowers, to explain the gesture (*idem*: 62). The giving of flowers would then symbolize marriage.

It is tempting to use this explanation for the females holding flowers in the Achaemenid period, rather than adapting Chares' tale for the occasion. For in essence Calmeyer and Shahbazi could be right. It fits in with the character of the scenes they are portrayed in. It would also tie in nicely with the interpretation proposed in the previous paragraph, as it would indicate the married status of a woman, as well as the tasks set for her in married life.

Final suggestions

That such imagery was used in an administrative context may seem surprising. On the other hand, it is questionable whether it was the primary function of the carrier of the image to be used to seal documents, and whether the image was chosen for that purpose. The carrier very often being a piece of jewellery, my guess would be the primary function of the piece and the image lay in the sphere of personal adornment and identity. Even the Pazyryk tapestry and the Erzingan box could have been adorned with this thought in mind, since access to both was restricted, in the latter case certainly and in the former case not unthinkably; the place where the tapestry was displayed may have been accessible to certain people only.

Both in the case of the new imagery where the lotus was used in a gender specific context, and in the cases where it was used in a status specific context, the social position indicated by the image on the seal was an important part of the message. When used as a seal that would of course be a useful thing to have put on record, but it would be equally useful in everyday life, since owning such an object was probably already reserved for a certain group of people. Also, displayed and duly admired it served the immediate purpose of showing others one's position in life.

Lastly, I would like to make a suggestion based on pure speculation, but with interesting prospects for future research. The images of women and men with lotuses occur in a corpus of imagery used on seals, in which a large place is reserved for very different images. If we look at the Persepolitan archives and those from Daskyleion for instance, the number of humans depicted is equal to or less than the number of other creatures shown (the proportions of seals at Daskyleion are 72 humans out of 185 seals). A large portion of the imagery is taken up by representations of animals and composite creatures, often taking on a stylized appearance (see for instance Kaptan 2002). It is not at all clear why people used these images, but one possibility is that they are family crests or emblems representing a particular group of people. This kind of seal imagery goes back a long way in Near Eastern history, and its appearance in Achaemenid archives is therefore not surprising.

The images of men and women on the seals that we have discussed, however, are very different from human representations on earlier seals. Earlier representations show humans in the act of worship, humans fighting and hunting and humans banqueting, but no (non royal) human figures

standing or sitting or repairing a bow. Also, the scenes showing a male touching the neck of a female do not have a connection with what went before in the Ancient Near East, iconographically speaking.

It is commonly thought that the administration of the Achaemenid empire involved not only Persians but also a substantial amount of local or non-Persian personnel. Could it be that the new imagery developing during the lifetime of the Achaemenid empire has some connection to the formation of this new class of people, who were involved in the administration of the empire, but also carried with them their own, local or other, background? Could it be that it was one of the ways in which this group of people tried to find its place in the empire and in life? After all, they did not belong to an ethnic Persian group, but being involved in the Achaemenid government and perhaps moving away from home might also loosen up their ties with the communities they came from.

As I said, this is pure speculation, but it could be useful to give ideas like this more attention, since the social dynamics surrounding the Achaemenid administration and the social context of seals and seal imagery are subjects which, although complicated, should be considered more thoroughly than they have been before.

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